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AUTHOR SooHoo, Suzanne
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ABSTRACT

A description is given of a project in which elementary school teachers acted as researchers in collaboration with a graduate school. The project began when in a meeting of educators a discussion centered on teachers' discontent with standardized test scores. A commitment was made to explore alternative indicators of student achievement. Although the topic of the project was indicators of student achievement, there was a working assumption that the process to be used to get at the topic was that teachers would assume the role of primary researchers. The project provided an opportunity for inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. Daily observation journals and monthly meetings afforded structured occasions in which to systematically reflect upon practice. The project description includes a discussion on the alternatives for measuring student achievement that were developed and the positive feelings the project engendered in the teachers. (JD)

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March 1989

TEACHER RESEARCHER: EMERGING CHANGE AGENT

Suzanne Soo Hoo
Principal
Carver Elementary School
ABC Unified School District

As an elementary school principal, I am often faced with the challenge of making changes. Typically, in most schools across the nation, change is driven from a force outside of the school and little or no teacher input is sought in the process. Change appears to occur mechanically, but, in truth, teachers usually change only in superficial ways. Longstanding practices and deeply held beliefs are seldom challenged. Teachers simply incorporate the change into their existing mode of operation.

The traditional role of principal is to enforce change, not make change. The school is the object to be changed, it is not the change agent. Although we are entrusted to change the lives of children, we are seldom entrusted with the responsibility to actively initiate change.

Perhaps this is why the opportunity to engage in a collaborative research project with Sycamore Elementary School and the Claremont Graduate School (CGS) was attractive to Carver School teachers and myself. The project started in spring 1988

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when five teachers, two principals, and a CGS faculty member began a discussion about teachers' discontent with standardized test scores. A critical indictment of the misuses of standardized tests sprang from this meeting and what followed was a commitment to explore alternative indicators of student achievement.

This commitment took the form of monthly meetings, observation journals kept by teachers, principals, and faculty member, and a collection of classroom artifacts revealing evidence of student progress. Teacher generated questions over the course of the semester included:

-how do we know students are learning?

-what important student information is not being measured by standardized tests?

-how do we capture the data that is available in our classrooms?

-what are some new ways of displaying student achievement?

-how might we talk differently about our students to parents?

-what do students say when asked how they know they are doing well?

There were a few working assumptions that embraced this project; the teachers would take an active role in questioning educational practice, would have the opportunity to reflect and collaborate about their findings, and would experiment with alternatives. In effect, the teacher would assume the role of researcher.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Teacher as Researcher

Commonly, schools hold short staff meetings characterized by mundane administrivia and/or workshops which dispense new curricular and instructional information much like a "spoon full of sugar" intended to "fix" current problems. Both are rather mindless activities which, unfortunately, serve as the most commonly practiced ritual for teachers' acquiring new knowledge. Schools effectively imprison rather than liberate the full power of the teacher's mind, which in turn deprives the teacher of his/her intellectual rights as an educator (Schaefer, 1967).

Some blame bureaucracy and regulation for undermining the teacher professional and advancing teacher conformity (Carnegie, 1988). Others attribute the work environment as being at fault since it is isolated, short on time, and low in intellectual rigor (Lanier & Little, 1986, p.561). Routines which minimize conscious decision making is yet another regularity that limits thoughtful teacher behavior (Clark & Peterson, 1986, p. 275).

When teachers do have opportunities to exchange information, they often express feelings and impulse rather than reflection and thought. Schools are not thought of as centers of inquiry that are systematically reflective (Schaefer, 1967), and teachers have not been organized "to promote inquiry or to add to the intellectual capital of the profession" (Lortie, 1975, p. 56). Clearly these conditions of isolation, routines, and a low level of intellectual stimulation are part of the cultural regularities

that act as barriers to engaging the teacher as active inquirer and researcher.

A major transformation of the role of the teacher is required to address the growing needs of the nation and to respond to the reform agenda (Carnegie, 1988). There is little question that we need teachers who think about what they are doing and resist incipient thoughtlessness (Arendt, 1968, p.5). Furthermore, teachers must become knowledge generators as well as knowledge transmitters.

If teachers take on teacher research, this emerging role can have a powerful impact on how teachers see themselves as initiators of change in their individual classrooms and in schools.

> If I set out to find an answer to some classroom matter, I am a learner, but in engaging in the inquiry, I am initiating a small piece of research. I am both learner and researcher ....What emerges ..... is that teachers need not wait for inquiries to be initiated by others. They can ask questions that arise from their own classrooms, can make their own records, collect their own data and modify their teaching in accordance with what they find. (Martin, 1987).

The purpose of all research should be the improvement of practices for the practitioner (Fenstermacher, 1986, p.43). For classroom teachers, research designed around their unique circumstances not only is more meaningful but becomes a valuable learning experience. Commitment to staff development focused on one's own specific problems is significantly different from staff development for the general improvement of instruction (Moore &

Hyde, cited in Lanier & Little, 1986, p. 562).

The collaborative experiment in which we participated was one of the rare opportunities for teachers to voice their opinions about their classroom practices. They were motivated by learning more about their own students. It is doubtful that external research, research initiated outside of the school system, could match the excitement generated by this project which suggests that "the working knowledge of teachers is legitimate and something to be reckoned with" (Sirotnik, 1987, p.10). This teacher initiated research stands in clear contrast to the more conventional position where

> Those "in the know" are the scholars that generate the research and the experts that package and disseminate the findings in usable form and evaluate the use of these packages in practice. Those "in the need of knowing" are the practitioners, the workers in schools, the consumers of new knowledge once it is appropriately distilled into in-service programs. (Sirotnik, 1987, p.7)

Teacher research sends the message that teachers know as much about their classrooms as the outside researcher. The teacher's role is no longer to accept blame for student performance but to challenge and develop research to investigate the condition. However, taking a new look at what you have been doing for years does not necessarily produce divergent alternatives. Reflection and re-examination must be coupled with access to new conceptual resources. This is accomplished through collaboration.

Collaborative Research

Collaborative research as defined in this project is a partnership between school and university personnel in pursuit of a research question. This link with the university provides a pool of theoretical wisdom from which the school can dip into from time to time when it requires renewal.

Although collaborative research appears to be a likely match, one has to wonder why schools and universities have not considered each other valuable resources in the past. Lieberman (1986, p. 28) suggests that there is "an elitist view that values the problems and descriptions of researchers over those of practitioners." (Lieberman, 1986, p. 28). To reverse the condition, the schools and universities must recognize the capability of the teacher to identify real problems. The benefits of such a team are described by Lieberman (1986) as:

> -collaborative research and development creates a structure for teachers that facilitates reflection and action on the messiness of teaching and schooling problems.
>
> -the team unites teachers and encourages collegial interaction ....
>
> -both the process of group interaction and the content of what is learned narrow the gap between "doing research" and "implementing research findings" ...
>
> -naturally occurring problems that teachers have in their schools may lend themselves better to this type of research and development than large-scale funded research, as it can respect the time lines of the school people rather than the research grant.
>
> -a collaborative team provides possibilities for teachers to assume new roles and exhibit leadership.
>
> -collaborative research legitimatizes teachers' practical understanding and their definition of problems for both

research and professional development. (p.31)

FINDINGS

Our project brought forth two types of findings. One discovery was in the area of student achievement where we found that there were areas of the curriculum that had not been given proper priority when measuring student achievement via standardized test scores or report cards. We also reaffirmed the idea of measuring learning in a developmentally over time rather than measuring students against each other. And lastly, we unearthed the concept of student and parent involvement in the assessment process.

The second type of finding was understanding about the role of teacher as researcher. It became clearer to us how this role empowers the classroom teacher to make substantive changes. The opportunities to engage in professional activity provided a circle of support for teachers which propelled thoughtful decisions to emerge about student learning.

Findings About Student Achievement

Following are highlights of our findings taken from our observation journals, minutes of our meetings, and student work.

1. Overlooked indicators of success

The narrow perspective that standardized test scores painted of student achievement was the single most criticized practice expressed by teachers in this project. As noted in one teacher's journal,

> "For years I have felt that our way of testing and evaluating children did a vast disservice to them and their parents. Children and their parents deserve better than we have given them. Standardized tests and present report cards tell very little about the real growth and development a child experiences in a school year." (Martin, 1988)

My own journal notes my early thoughts,

> "In our journey to explore alternative indicators of success, I found this naturalistic data gathering exciting and intriguing because I have always known that the conventional modes of reporting student achievement, standardized test scores and report cards, were shallow and meaningless. This project empowered and encouraged us to look beyond conventional means and legitimized what we always "sensed" was happening in the classrooms." (SooHoo, 1988)

Using the techniques of classroom observation and reflection on student learning, teachers were able to recognize, describe, and value other areas of achievement such as growth in self confidence, taking initiative, cooperative group processes, risk taking, ability to ask good questions, and the joy of learning. These "soft" indicators possessed equal or greater value to classroom teachers than standardize tests as genuine indicators of success. One teacher wrote on a student's report card,

> "I would not trade her zest and creativity for precision but she might push a little harder in some areas. Goal for the year - enjoyment of writing, development of fluency."

Another teacher observes at the end of the year,

> "(David) may have left a moldy sandwich is his desk for the summer, but his ability to deal with a group and accept and offer praise has made a powerful impact on him. ....(David) is improving in his relationship with his cooperative learning group. He is making thoughtful statements and is helpful." (Martin, 1988)

A principal wrote,

> "We discussed the limits of product evaluation and recognized aspects of growth in the learning process not reflected in a product evaluation alone." (Eckhardt, 1988)

In sum, teachers and principals felt that process indicators where no concrete paper and pencil assessment existed needed to be part of the comprehensive profile of an individuals's performance. How to report these behaviors became the next challenge.

The graphic display in Table 1 was one model developed by the Carver School psychologist to help us report data not necessarily contained in standard rubrics. In this instance, the teacher was particularly interested in assessing data on a student's developing self concept and socialization skills. We used the content of a student's journal to measure this area.

The kinds of product indicators used were also re-examined. It appeared that student writing and drawings supplied a fertile pool of information, and such information was common in all classrooms. Much time was spent discussing how to analyze and draw meaning from these data. At our monthly meetings, teachers brought samples of student work that showed increased fluency, plot development, sophistication of use of descriptors, and the student's usage of a diversity of subjects. A teacher notes,

> "At the beginning of the year not even Alex could read his invented spelling, now, while spelling is still invented, he and many times others can read his rough copies. I consider his desire to self-correct to be an indicator of growth. (Babe, 1988).

My journal cites,

> "(David's) journal revealed a demonstrative growth spurt when he departed from his perseveration of writing about skateboards and how bored he was of everything (approximately 7 entries) to writing sensitively about what it feels like to be in the rain. From that point on, (David's) writing showed real involvement and self interest in his topics." (SooHoo, 1988)

A teacher wrote about (Ben),

> "His writing is perhaps his strongest area - though he says he prefers math. His writing is often sensitive and perceptive. In addition, he adds 'twists' in plot development and endings, ..." (Babe, 1988)

Clearly, these writing processes have not been adequately captured in traditional assessments. Current rubrics available to us in the elementary school do not respect the sophisticated development of writing that these teachers have so admirably documented.

2. Development over time

During the course of the project, it became clearer to us we must measured students' progress individually, over time and not against other students in the class. We extended that thinking to measuring progress over the course of several years.

> "We need to assess over time and not just one year. One of the outcomes has been the agreement that we would attempt to observe children over time - perhaps from Kindergarten to sixth grade." (Martin, 1988).

Even report cards have trouble showing that students are on their way to getting there." Indeed, they, like standardized test

scores, show if you have "it" or if you don't. It fails to register any learning after the test. How easy to fall in the category of underachiever if you were generally a day late in demonstrating your understanding of the curriculum.

3. Student perspective of assessment

At the end of the semester, teachers asked students to write paragraphs summarizing what they thought they had learned this year. From the limited English speaking student (see Appendix A for unedited work),

> "This year I have be doing very good. From the beginning of the year to now I inpufed in my spelling. I have been lisening to the teacher more. I have more friends then at the beginig of the year. I have be fast in every thing. My group has inpufed alot too. I wright more and I read more. Well I think I have inpufed on many things this year."

Although the spelling leaves much to be desired, one can extract the student's healthy self concept about learning and about the people around her. This entry also shows that fluency over mechanics is valued and therefore she was able to fully express her thoughts without fears of correctness. In virtually every case the student's and the teacher's perception about the student's progress concurred. All of them could express how the students had grown and describe areas that could not be measured on standardized tests.

When students were asked how they knew they were doing well, most expressed that teacher's verbal and written comments were the most helpful to them. Students did not mention tests or

report cards as effective tools to communicate their progress. Furthermore, they reported that they would want their parents to see a portfolio of the work rather than a report card at parent conference time.

4. Parent perspective of assessment

It became evident during the course of our project that we were beginning to change some of our fundamental assumptions about student achievement. We therefore had an obligation to seek parent input about student achievement and also to educate them about our new findings.

The general community was surveyed (Appendix B) and the parents of the Carver School PTA and School Site Council were asked to tell us what they wanted to know about their student's progress. Specifically, they were asked two questions:

1) How do you know when your child is learning?

2) If there were no report cards, what questions would you ask the teacher about how your child is learning?

They cited progress in reading and math as significant information but curiously they most frequently asked the question, "How well is my child getting along with other kids?" Hence, the information most needed by parents was not regularly reported to them in conventional terms i.e. standardized test scores, report cards. This information was obtained only if the teacher happen to mention it or if the parents attended parent conferences.

Naturally, the project influenced the kind of information the teachers subsequently shared at parent conferences. They were no longer satisfied with using the report card as the primary vehicle to report student progress. Instead they brought portfolios of writing and art work to the conferences and showed parents how their children had developed from one period of time to another. In addition, they amended the report card by adding parent and student checklists to impress the need for a partnership of interested people in the student's learning.

At special school events like History Day where students are asked to participate either individually or in small groups to generate a History Day project, we announce to parents that these projects are evidence of the children's ability to cooperate with others, identify a problem, research a topic, and communicate their findings. Furthermore, these projects are examples of the REAL report cards of student achievement.

Findings About Teacher As Researcher

Although the topic of the project was indicators of student achievement, there was a working assumption that the process to be used to get at the topic was that teachers would assume the role of primary researchers. This role made a critical departure from the way teachers were accustomed to operating.

1. Opportunity to reflect

> "This project has given us a chance to reflect together verbally and in writing, on children and the classroom in ways that have never been possible before." (Martin, 1988).

Teachers describe the research project as an opportunity for inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. Daily observation journals and monthly meetings afforded structured occasions in which to systematically reflect about our practice.

Reflection as a process used in this project is best defined by Donald Schon in his book, The Reflective Practitioner. Reflection is the when "... both ordinary people and professional practitioners often think about what they are doing ...." As the practitioner identifies a puzzling, troubling or interesting phenomenon, "he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings which have been explicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action." (Schon, 1983, p. 50)

2. Opportunity to collaborate

Monthly access to other teachers and an university faculty member facilitated an arena of collaborative research and inquiry. This idea of making a group commitment to explore a question is quite foreign on school campuses where more commonly, teachers are isolated in the isolated "egg crate" institution called school.

The group easily kept its monthly commitment to meet. The more we talked, the more confidence we gained and the more articulate we became. We began to get comfortable with hearing our own voices as we constructed meaning about student achievement.

With new understandings and new found confidence in articulation, we began to enlarge our circle of influence and collaboration to include parents and other colleagues. In return, several parents expressed gratitude that the school had expanded its notions of success to include a variety of achievement measurements. Other faculty members are also now engaged in keeping classroom observation journals.

3. Opportunity to value one's self

Because of the collaborative nature of this project, participants describe,

"I feel I'm on equal footing with the university."

"I feel the university is looking at the reality of our world."

Typical university research is different from collaborative teacher research in that outside research generates research questions and recommendations which are often impersonal and alien to one's own classroom experience. In this collaborative research project, teachers posed the questions that were troubling them personally and created alternative practices that were designed to match their individual understanding and their classroom's profile of students; alternatives to help the real children in rooms 6 and 8 succeed.

The university professor facilitated discussions, visited classrooms, interviewed students, and gave suggestions in data

collection and organizing our data. We in turn analyzed our data and developed alternative practices.

In many ways, we felt that the project had legitimized some of our pent up intuitive feelings about student learning and progress. It allowed us to take our tacit understandings and make them explicit through the empowerment of acting and valuing ourselves as researchers.

Opportunities to Change Conventional Wisdom

In the process of reflecting and re-examining our classrooms, we stumbled upon some contradictions about what we believed and what we practiced. One example is the juxtaposition of our belief that children learn developmentally and our report card grades. In one instance we say each child develops along a personal continuum and in another we measure his/her performance against other students in the class.

Another example is when we labeled kids as "high," "middle," and "low," using conventional standards, like publishers' tests, to identify them. When we realized that all kids learn and some just learn differently, and that there are many ways to measure student learning, we found these labels were no longer appropriate. A "high" in math student could also be a "low" in cooperative group skills student. Neither of which should have higher priority than the other and neither should propagate an unjust label on the learner.

The standards of success are still shifting in our minds. There are still alot of behaviors we value as important learning that we don't properly measure. We have re-prioritized some learning but we are still evolving and experimenting with the many fronts that we have identified as important. The writing portfolio is the only measurement we have now institutionalized.

A commitment of more time is needed to continue the dialogue. The readiness to explore and design alternatives is there.

Implications

Providing a forum for teachers to engage in inquiry, reflection, and collaboration is a valuable practice for teachers to participate in for several reasons. First of all, an assumption exists that the teacher is a professional and is capable of examining his/her own teaching practice. Second, it positions the teacher in an ongoing process of intellectually engaging issues thus developing a community of thinkers. Third, by frequently engaging in thoughtful practice and reflection, we equip teachers with the skills to confront the critical issues facing public education and we develop the capacity of the school to respond as well. These activities also influence the norms of the school culture. Risk taking, empowerment, collegiality are hea'thy norms for both the adult and student population at the school. In addition, the connection between the university and

the schools helps link theory with practice and causes a more symbiotic relationship, thus aligning two valuable resources. Finally, in this process, teachers are seen as change agents rather than the passive recipients of change. They have the potential to initiate and implement substantive changes in schooling.

When teachers collectively engage in inquiry, reflection, and collaboration, the school becomes the site of inquiry. It becomes a place where people search for meaning and rationality in their work. Change is organic and not imposed externally. There is a collective ownership to change, backed with professional commitment.

Staff room talk and recent observations in the Carver School classrooms confirm that behind those classroom doors is a broader, more comprehensive understanding of student achievement. As a faculty, we pledged to keep developmental writing portfolios on every student. At parent conferences, we agreed to discuss and show various samples of student progress not traditionally shared with parents. We now are able to more clearly label for parents and ourselves indicators of success not typically measured by standardized tests and report cards.

CONCLUSION

By providing frequent opportunities for collaboration, inquiry, and reflection, we hope to transform the school culture

from a passive victim of change to a dynamic, thoughtful, renewing center of inquiry. In renewing schools, teachers actively generate knowledge rather than merely transmit knowledge. They learn from examining their own practices and engaging in collegial dialogue. They participate in collaborative research where researcher and teacher mutually explore issues, and they build a community of thoughtful practitioners which thereby increases the capacity of the school to actively engage in change.

Teacher researchers are the kind of human resource public schools need today. These teachers who are constantly exploring and learning will gain public confidence as true professionals engaged in the continual quest for excellence. They have the potential to make substantive changes in our classrooms and should be seriously considered as the key players in school reform.

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This year I have be doing very good. From the beginning of the ye I improve in my writing. I have been listening to the stories more. I have more friends than at the begining of the year. I have been listening my tea- -cher like them at the beginning of the year. I have to put in every thing. My group has improved alot too. I write more and I read more. Well I think I have improved on many things this year.

By Socorro Martinez

the Cutting EdgE

CARVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Volume 1 Number 2

HOW DO I KNOW MY CHILD IS DOING WELL IN SCHOOL?

Dear Parents;

Children's academic and social growth are of common interest to both parent and educator. Adequately measuring children's learning encompasses more than a single test because children are complex human beings.

Two weeks ago the Carver faculty compiled the following list as some of the ways they measure student growth. They are: role play; teach a peer; build an equation with blocks or manipulatives; teacher observation on willingness to take risks; persistence on difficult tasks by teacher observation; questions students ask; level of books selected by students from library.

Last spring when we asked our fourth through sixth grade students how they knew they were doing well in school, they told us that verbal praise gave them the most valuable feedback on their progress. This year, we'd like to ask you two questions:

Detach and Return to School

Name of Parent(s):_____

Child(ren)'s Grade Level(s): _____ _____

_____ _____

1. What behaviors do you see at home that tell you your child is learning at school? (e.g., She likes to read.) _____

_____

2. If there were no report cards at all on this earth and we as a community had to create our own reporting system, what are the most important question you would ask the teacher to find out how well your child is doing? (e.g., The PTA said, "How well is Johnny getting along with the other kids?") _____

_____

_____

We will use the information you share with us in providing you with better information at our upcoming parent conferences. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Suzanne SooHoo
Principal

Important Dates to Remember

November 29	Skate Night
December 5	PTA Board Meeting
December 9	Student Free Day No School
December 15	Winter Program Parent Conferences Report Cards
December 19- January 3	Winter Vacation

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TABLE I

Frequency of Positive Statements regarding self and others included in Journal Entries by Student # 26 April 4 - May 6, inclusive